

[News feature](#)

**Sunday Post special report follows the team bringing vital aid to African danger zone**

## Terrifying car journey down the road to hell

By Euan Duguid

**"WHEN YOU land, try to not make eye contact with anyone," said Abdel, a personal protection officer from the UN.**

The burly former Egyptian Special Forces soldier had sat beside me by chance.

We were on the connecting flight between Abidjan in the Ivory Coast, where he'd been on assignment, and our final destination, Roberts International Airport, a single runway deep in the Liberian bush.

"Some locals will try to carry your bag — and then demand a huge fee," he whispered, as if worried about eavesdroppers.

He warned that, in Monrovia, Liberia's capital, I shouldn't walk alone, especially at night.

"People are very poor, desperate, and muggers will take everything from you. They will leave you naked.

### Advice

"If you do get in a mugging situation, don't resist or they will attack you, probably with a machete. Even if you survive, you will get a blood infection, maybe Aids."

My heart pounded as Abdel, who has spent over two years in Monrovia with a 15,000-strong UN peacekeeping force, continued to offer his advice.

I was heading into West Africa's most troubled nation on a week-long assignment — focusing on the vital work of Mercy Ships.

The Scots-backed charity's hospital ship Africa Mercy, the largest of its kind in the world, has been moored in Monrovia's Freeport docks for the last nine months.

On board, over 400 medical volunteers from around the world provide specialist surgery and treatment for a war-ravaged people.

### Instincts

"It's important to stay safe and listen to your instincts," Abdel said, handing me a business card with the crest of the United Nations Mission in Liberia.

"But if you do get into any trouble, give me a phone — we have tanks and guns."

I nervously placed the card inside a booklet on Mercy Ships, whose motto is "Bringing hope and healing to the forgotten poor".

My own overriding emotion entering Liberia was abject fear. Yet it was a nation born out of hope.

In 1820, 86 black passengers set sail from the United States for the land of their ancestors. The voyage began with a reading from the Bible, a passage in which the Israelites were promised a land of milk and honey.

### Horror story

But what has unfolded in Liberia bears more resemblance to a horror story.

For more than 150 years the liberated slaves (many more arrived after the first voyage) and their descendants dominated the country's native African population.

Ironically, they imposed their own master-slave system, denying rights and equal participation in government to the 16 native tribes.

Simmering resentment and ethnic tensions eventually boiled over.



In 1980 a group of army officers of tribal origin, led by Samuel Doe, seized power. Doe forged links with the US, but his regime banned newspapers, political parties and held staged elections. Civil war broke out in 1989 and in September 1990, Doe was overthrown and executed by forces of rebel leader Yornie Johnson.

## War

But the war dragged on until 1996, and a year later warlord Charles Taylor became president. His autocratic rule saw opposition leaders targeted for assassination.

War broke out again in 1999. Taylor was ousted in 2003 and is now on trial for alleged war crimes, while the UN holds a fragile peace.

Barbarous fighting, characterised by acts of cannibalism, had claimed the lives of around 250,000 people and displaced a million others into refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

The conflict has left Liberia in the grip of hardship that surpasses anything I could have ever imagined.

The journey from Roberts International into Monrovia, some 35 miles, is the road to hell.

My Mercy Ships driver engaged in a perilous slalom through craters and potholes.

## Coastal

I'd arrived at 11 pm and we journeyed through an all-engulfing darkness I've only ever known in the remote Highlands.

Our Land Rover headlights would illuminate occasional huddles of corrugated iron communities at the side of the road, growing in frequency and size as we neared the capital.

Monrovia itself is a tumbledown coastal city, home to over a million people — the majority having no electricity, piped water or sewerage.

In the next week I witnessed squalor and overcrowding on a medieval scale.

## Scars

The scars of war are still highly visible, with most high-rise buildings derelict and empty after shelling. Some lampposts (street lighting is only on the main roads and is provided by emergency power) remain riddled with bullet holes. There's an African saying that when two elephants fight in the grass, it is the grass that suffers.

And how the Liberian grass has suffered. With no proper hospital system, payment is required for what little medical service there is.

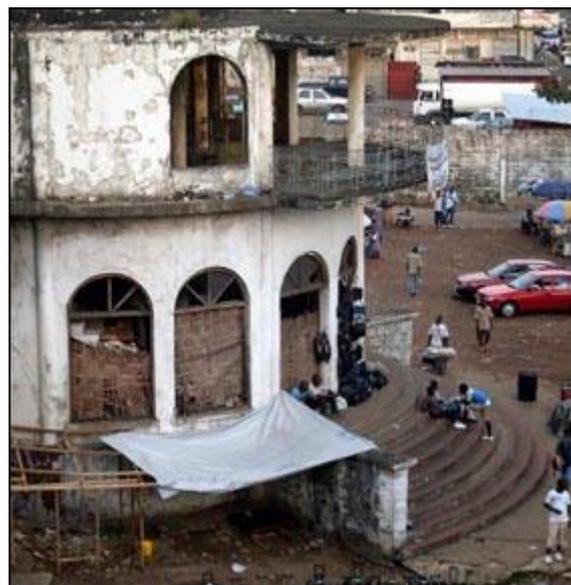
Life expectancy is 41. For every 1000 live births there are 144 deaths.

Just before I arrived in my hotel's security compound, my driver highlighted the contrast with the world I'd left.

He said babies born in Liberia with hare lips and cleft palates are often considered demonic as belief in witchcraft is still endemic.

Simple dental problems, easily dealt with in the UK, can develop into facial tumours that slowly suffocate their victims, who also suffer horrific stigmatisation as they die.

Even before I set foot on board the *Africa Mercy*, I realised how vital this boat was to this benighted country.





## Scots doc who wants to leave a medical legacy for the people of Liberia

**IN THE Alfred and Agnes Memorial Orphanage, just north of Monrovia, Abraham Jackson leads the impassioned African singing.**

The charismatic 17-year-old has a natural gusto that belies a tragic tale typical of many of Liberia's orphans. Abraham's father was beaten to death by rebels when he was a child. His traumatised mother lost her sanity in a city gripped by a savage war.

Since the early '90s, Abraham's spent his life in this humble outcrop of buildings that houses 71 parentless children. Today, he says he wants to become a full-time musician.

It's stories like this that epitomise the spirit of many people in Liberia — and keep drawing Dundee-born Dr Keith Thomson (right) back.

### **Consultant anaesthetist**

"There's something about Africa," said the semi-retired 61-year-old consultant anaesthetist, who works at Basingstoke Hospital, Hampshire.

"They call it the Dark Continent but the warmth, vibrancy and hope get under your skin."

The previous evening, a Friday, I'd arrived in Liberia, on the same flight as Dr Keith (as he prefers to be known), vice chairman of Mercy Ships UK, to find out about the charity's hospital ship, *Africa Mercy*.

Operations are restricted to weekdays so Dr Keith had taken me on a tour of some of the projects he's personally sponsored.





During my visit to the orphanage I gave some of the younger kids a large Lion Rampant flag — which they hoisted up a pole before proudly posing for pictures (above).

This was a world away from the hostile city I'd been warned of.

Keith first got the bug after a three-month visit to South Africa as a medical student in 1975. Nine years later, fully qualified, he returned to work for a year as a senior medical officer in Edendale Hospital outside Pietermaritzburg, at the height of apartheid.

### Passion rekindled

But the father of two's passion for Africa was rekindled after reading an article on Mercy Ships during a flight from London to Manchester in 1990.

"At Easter 1991 I went to Ghana, the first of 21 trips, mostly on annual leave, to nine different African countries, including Sierra Leone, Ghana, Senegal and Liberia."

Dr Keith's been involved in hundreds of operations for Mercy Ships. But he's also has had to overcome his own health battle to continue his work.

In 2005 he was diagnosed with tongue cancer — but Africa inspired his fightback.

"One of my aims was getting back to Africa to help people. I really get a lot of personal pleasure using my skills that way." He is determined to use his experience to leave a legacy in Liberia long after *Africa Mercy* leaves next month.

### Fifth visit

This was his fifth visit and during his weeklong stint he had organised the Liberian Anaesthetic Conference (above) in Monrovia's dilapidated JFK hospital — described by one Scot as 'Ninewells gone wrong.'

The vast American-built complex opened its doors 20 years ago. But because of the civil conflict and a lengthy closure it's not an

enticing prospect if you need treatment.

Dr Keith said, "There are only 35 anaesthetic nurses but no medically trained anaesthetists for the whole country, whose population is nearly four million.

### Training

"At Basingstoke we have 35 medically trained anaesthetists for a population of 300,000.

"Here, anaesthetics are given by nurses with various degrees of training and



resources. Often they have disposable tubes I would use at home once. Here they will use them until they fall apart. Spinal needles are often used until they are blunt."

In a crowded room in JFK almost all the nurses had turned up, some travelling hundreds of miles, to listen to Dr Keith and his team.

As well as rallying such collective fighting spirit — vital to rebuilding this ruined nation — Keith is spurred on by the individual cases he's been involved in.

### "Starfish"

Whether it's directly on the operating table or through sponsorship, like the case of Abraham Jackson, Dr Keith calls these examples his "starfish." It's a reference to a fable of a little girl who finds thousands of starfish marooned on a beach, dying and dead of dehydration. She began throwing them individually back into the ocean, and like her, Dr Keith knows he can't rescue everyone.

But it's the starfish he can save he takes heart from.



- Read more about Dr Keith and Mercy Ships at [www.africansmiles.co.uk](http://www.africansmiles.co.uk)
- Next Sunday Euan samples life on board the *Africa Mercy*, and helps outfox thieves trying to clamber on board.

## How you can help

Mercy Ships rely on donations to fund their work. If you'd like to donate, write to: Susie Hope, Fundraising Manager (Scotland), Mercy Ships UK Scottish Office, PO Box 8777, Biggar, ML12 9AA.

Call 01899 830475 or log on to their website at [www.mercyships.org.uk](http://www.mercyships.org.uk)

[<<< News index](#)

